Eligibility & Enrollment Veteran Journey

Based on user research conducted in September 2022, this map explores how Veterans understand and experience benefits eligibility and enrollment at the VA.

Ad Hoc

Awareness

Veterans become aware of VA benefits during different points in their journey. Our research show that the time between leaving the military and engaging with VA beneifts is anywhere between 2 months and 40 years.

Eligibility

Veterans begin to pinpoint the types of benefits they are eligible for that are specific to their unique situation.

Enrollment

Veterans prepare and submit the necessary documentation and paperwork to receive benefits. The VA approves or denies benefits based on eligibility. This determination can take months or years.

Coverage

Once approved, Veterans are generally pleased with the benefits and care they receive. Veterans may experience qualifying life events that impact their benefits and need to go through some version of this process again.

Actions

Examples of different approaches taken to complete each phase.

Channels

- Veterans Affairs
- In Person
- Phone
- Email
- Mail
- Web
- Physical Location

Awareness

- Military out-processing procedure (TAPs, exit physical)
- Veteran contacts VA via telephone after leaving active duty
- Veteran discuss the VA and/or benefits provided by the VA with family, friends or their local Veteran community
- Veteran is connected with VSO by friend, family member or fellow Veteran
- Veteran reads about the VA online through Reddit, Facebook, misc. support groups
- Veteran visits VA web ecosystem
- Veteran visits VA location

Eligibility

- Veteran may work with their local VSO to determine their eligibility for a wide range of benefits
- Veteran may post online about their unique needs and situation and and recieve support from other Veterans and caregivers through Reddit, Facebook and other support groups
- Veteran may visit the VA web ecosystem to learn more about the benefits they are eligible for
- Veteran may call the VA
- Veteran may visit their local VA location
- In some cases, a Veteran works directly with a VA staff member to determine eligibility and begin the enrollment process

Enrollment

- VA approves or denies benefit based on eligibility
- Veteran visits VA location to fill out forms in person
- Veteran may need to travel for appointments at several locations in order to successfully enroll in benefits (VA offices, medical centers, care providers, schools, financial institutions, etc). Sometimes these appointments cannot be scheduled for over a year.
- Veteran may communicate with VSO via email and phone to complete forms
- Physical forms from VA are often sent via mail to Veteran to fill out and return while completing enrollment

Coverage

- Veteran begins to recieve benefits or care through the VA
- Veteran engages with health care and disability benefits through VA affiliated medical offices and clinics
- If the Veteran needs to make any changes or updates to their benefits the process begins again, with an appeal or a new application

Observations

Overview of positive and negative sentiments within each phase.

Awareness

- A lack of knowledge transfer upon leaving active duty often leads to Veterans not being made aware of the benefits provided by the VA
- Relationships with friends, family, and other Veterans color the perception of the VA
- Reputation of VA being slow, ineffective and difficult to work with often prevents Veterans from engaging

Eligibility

- This process is most often described as being unclear and frustrating
- Forms and paperwork required to determine eligibility are often scattered around the VA ecosystem
- Veterans feel confident they will be able to recieve benefits they are eligible for, but are aware of the fact that this is a long and often difficult process

Enrollment

- Veterans find the process complicated, and often need assistance via a VSO, online support group or other Veterans
- Dedicating the time and energy necessary to complete this step can be emotionally, physically and financially draining
- Veterans experience a high level of administrative burden in applying for benefits

Coverage

- Once benefits and coverage begins, Veterans generally express that they are pleased with the level of care and benefit they were receiving
- If a Veteran needs to file a new claim or update their rating, they often work with an attorney or a VSO
- Veterans will avoid addressing their needs with the VA due to the level of committment and difficulty required

Quotes

Taken directly from our user interviews.

Awareness

"Don't go to the VA, they're not going to help you." - P7

"I really didn't have any idea and I didn't know that those benefits were available." - P10

"TAPs classes were as useful as a screendoor in a space ship." - P4

"In my mind, the VA was for the old guys. It wasn't for the young guys just getting out." -P1

Eligibility

"Even though I had been through these classes on what you're entitled to, I had no idea it was so complicated." -P10

"There seemed to be a lot of obstacles, and other Vets who were like 'Good luck with that.'" - P12

"I'm tired of this cycle of people having to learn the hard way" - P19

Enrollment

"During the waiting period, you just wait and hope they haven't lost your paper work and it's still being processed." - P17

"The application was grueling." - P11

"Health care has been an extremely big obstacle in the last year" - P13

"The single most helpful thing was the Reddit forum." - P4

Coverage

"My life would have been a lot different if I had the VA healthcare and benefits in the 90s rather than the mid 2000s." - P1

"Two times I've had urgent needs and both times I did not get ahold of my counselor, because they were no longer my counselor." - P18

"I feel absolutely ecstatic about my current health care." - P7